

Uniform Statistical Reporting System

The 1996 Client Baseline Study



Study Description

And

Questionnaires

Statewide Office of Family Court Services
Judicial Council of California
Administrative Office of the Courts

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Uniform Statistical Reporting System,
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Study Description

The 1996 Client Baseline Study

This study is part of a program of research sponsored by the Statewide Office of Family Court Services entitled The Uniform Statistical Reporting System (USRS), fulfilling a legislative mandate for statewide statistics that advise family law policy. USRS provides rigorous statistics on issues facing policymakers, judges, attorneys, court personnel, researchers, special-interest groups, and parents who use the family courts.

Objectives:

The 1996 Client Baseline Study¹ (informally known as the 1996 Snapshot Study) is a representative cross section of parents using family court services across the state. Like its 1991 and 1993 predecessors, this baseline study offers reliable statistics about the utility of family court services and documents the prevailing experiences of clients in court-based resolution of disputes about child custody and visitation. The 1996 study was designed to continue to chart trends and changes since 1991, and to address questions raised in light of budget constraints, rising caseloads, and changes in law and court procedures.

Mediation of child-custody and visitation issues is the service provided most often by family court services; however, the various courts offer a wide range of family court services, meeting diverse needs throughout the state. In addition to child-custody mediation, the 1996 Client Baseline Study collected data about focused child-custody evaluations and investigations,² comprehensive child-custody evaluations and investigations, and guardianships. Premarital counseling, stepparent adoption, dependency mediation, counseling on other family matters, and other family court services were counted, but no other information was gathered about those services.

The baseline studies collect information about all California clients using the family court services listed above within the designated time period of the research. The 1996 study gathered information for a two-week period from September 30 through October 11, 1996.

Procedures:

The USRS system follows a collaborative research model. Research questions for this study were identified in consultation with policy leaders, service providers, and family court personnel across the state. Data collection methods that facilitated client

¹A full description of the content, design, and methodology of the study is provided in *The 1996 Client Baseline Study: Data Collection Methods* (1997), Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco.

²This label covered a variety of fairly new services offered in many family courts. These include emergency screenings, ex parte screenings, brief assessments, fast-track evaluations, ASAP screenings, mini-evaluations, expedited investigations. The term was meant to distinguish these services from the more traditional comprehensive child-custody investigation and evaluation.

participation on a confidential basis were developed in site visits and consultation with individual court mediation service providers. Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the findings rests with the Statewide Office.

Instruments in the 1996 Client Baseline Study were customized for particular types of services:

For *child custody mediation sessions*, three questionnaires were administered:

- The *Client Profile* was completed by each parent before the session. This questionnaire covered the family's current situation, issues each person was bringing to the session, and parent and child demographics.
- Immediately after the custody mediation session, each parent was asked to complete a *Parent Viewpoint—Mediation Session*, a survey of the client's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the counselor, the process, and the outcome.
- The *Counselor Report*, which described the process and outcome of the session, was completed by the counselor after each session.

For *focused investigation and evaluations*, the same *Client Profile* and *Counselor Report* were used and the same research procedures were followed. A slightly different exit questionnaire, *Parent Viewpoint—FIE*, was given to each parent to complete after the session.

For *comprehensive investigations and evaluations*, no client forms were used since, unlike the previously named services, clients were not likely to be in the family court services' offices on the day when the counselors filled out their questionnaires. For each investigation and evaluation completed in the two-week study period, the counselor was asked to fill out an *Evaluation and Investigation Report* describing the process, outcomes, and recommendations, and providing some information about the family. A case was considered completed when the counselor submitted the report. The report's completion during the two-week study period was used as the criterion for including the case in the study because only at that point could the counselor provide the full summary information about the case.

For *guardianship investigations* completed in the two-week study period, the counselor filled out a *Counselor Report—Guardianship* describing the case, process, outcomes, and recommendations. As in the comprehensive investigations and evaluations, and for the same reasons, a case was considered completed when the counselor submitted the report. No client forms were used because guardianship clients were not likely to be in the offices on the same day the report was completed.

If a *guardianship mediation* took place, clients were likely to be on-site and were asked to fill out a *Client Viewpoint—Guardianship*, a survey of the client's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the mediator, the process, and the outcome.

The client questionnaires were available in both English and Spanish.

For *parent education or orientation classes* held during the study period, a one-page questionnaire, *Parent Education or Orientation Feedback*, was distributed for clients' evaluation of the session.

All direct providers of family court services across the state filled out brief questionnaires, indicating their gender, ethnicity, experience, years of service, and perception of changes in family courts during their tenures.

Family Court Services directors in each superior court completed the *Summary of Services Questionnaire*, an inventory of services currently provided in their courts as well as a tally of services actually provided within the data collection period. This count made it possible to calculate the percentage of cases for which research data was provided.

Use of the Findings:

These findings can provide an important resource for those who care about the best interests of children including the courts, legislators, attorneys, counselors, and parents. This survey's results will become part of the USRS database. USRS results have been incorporated into parent education programs, mediator training's and workshops, and judicial education. The data have also contributed to legislative hearings and have been included in testimony to state and federal commissions. Results have appeared in the media and have been presented to professional conferences in California, nationally and internationally.